



# News Release

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## Po`ouli Capture Efforts Resume

### *"Last Ditch Effort" Hopes to Bring Remaining Three Birds into Captivity*

A team of biologists is resuming efforts on Maui this week to capture and bring into captivity the last three remaining po`ouli, a unique Hawaiian forest bird, known to exist. A similar attempt earlier this year was foiled by adverse weather conditions and an uncooperative or perhaps net-wary female bird.

"We're hoping for better luck this time," said Eric VanderWerf, lead Hawaiian forest bird biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Islands office. "As a safety measure for the birds, we don't deploy our mist-nets to capture birds during inclement weather. Not only is it dangerous for the birds, which could become hypothermic if they get too wet, but helicopter transport also isn't available under poor visibility conditions. Last winter, we only set up nets on 22 of the scheduled 42 field days, and though we saw the po`ouli 12 times in 9 days, she was able to avoid capture."

Four week-long field trips led by Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project staff have been scheduled so far, with the first beginning on October 21 and the last extending into mid-December. The six to eight-person teams will attempt to capture the male bird first this time. If he is safely brought into captivity, the crews will move on to the two female po`ouli.

"We believe that bringing the three po`ouli in from the wild is the best and last chance we have to save this unique bird from extinction," said Paul Conry, wildlife program manager for the State DLNR's Division of Forestry & Wildlife. "Despite our efforts to protect habitat, control weeds and predators, and translocate one of the females into the male's territory, we have not been able to form a breeding pair in the wild. It has been a long process trying to bring these three birds together, and we hope that what we have learned over the last couple of years will allow us to be successful this time around."

The 2002 translocation project by the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project staff provided significant knowledge about how a po`ouli may react to captivity. Using that experience, biologists were able to develop a protocol for bringing the birds into captivity.



After sighting the bird, they set up a mist net – a soft, fine mesh, almost invisible net – is set up in the vicinity to capture the bird. If successfully captured, the bird will be placed in a padded temporary holding cage so that it cannot injure itself. A highly qualified avian veterinarian will be on each trip to evaluate the bird's health and stress levels.

If the bird is judged to be healthy and not overly stressed, team members will then hike with the bird to the nearest helicopter landing zone, where it will be picked up and flown with the avian veterinarian to the Maui Bird Conservation Center in Olinda. The facility – like the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center on the Big Island – is operated by the Zoological Society of San Diego.

“Establishing a breeding pair of poʻouli may be the most challenging task we've ever attempted,” said Alan Lieberman, avian conservation coordinator for the Zoological Society. “We have successfully bred several Hawaiian bird species, including the ʻalala, puaiohi, and palila, and even reintroduced them into the wild, but to start off with only three birds, all of which are at least 6 years old, just increases the difficulties.”

“We had hoped these birds could be recovered in the wild,” he continued. “But now we're running out of time, and we're committed to this last ditch effort to prevent their extinction.”

The stocky little bird with a black mask is part of the Hawaiian honeycreeper family, but is so unique it occupies its own genus. It is the only Hawaiian forest bird to rely heavily on native tree snails as its food. Despite extensive searches, only three birds – a male and two females – have been found in recent years, and all in separate home ranges.

The elusive poʻouli was not even discovered until 1973, when a group of University of Hawaiʻi students conducting research on the east slope of Haleakala sighted a bird they had never seen before. It was named “poʻouli,” which means black head in Hawaiian, by Mary Kawena Pukuʻi, a renowned authority on Hawaiian culture. Biologists say its quiet and infrequent call makes it much more difficult to find than more vocal species such as the Maui parrotbill.

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